

Housing and Homelessness Policy and Accountability Committee Minutes



Wednesday 23 April 2025

PRESENT

Committee members: Councillors Jacolyn Daly (Chair), Asif Siddique, Sally Taylor, Omid Miri and Adronie Alford

Other Councillors: Councillor Frances Umeh (Cabinet Member for Housing and Homelessness)

Guests

James Berry (Station Commander, Hammersmith Fire Station)
Florrie Mahon (Chair, Fire, Building Safety and Repairs Working Group)
Michael Angus (Director, Barons Court Project)

Officers

Richard Shwe (Director of Housing)
Richard Buckley (Assistant Director, Residents and Buildings Safety)
Dr Nicola Lang (Director of Public Health)
Clare Dorning (Head of Homelessness Prevention Assessment)
Debbie Yau (Committee Coordinator)

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

None.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

3. MINUTES

RESOLVED

That the minutes of the meeting held on 27 January 2025 were agreed to be accurate.

4. HOUSING SAFETY COMPLIANCE

Richard Shwe (Director of Housing) highlighted that keeping residents safe in their homes was not only a legal duty but at the heart of what were done. This report set out H&F's performance in key health and safety areas including gas, electric, water, lifts, asbestos and fire but also Category 1 Hazards, structural walls, and playgrounds. He remarked that the Residents and Building Safety team had done a lot over the last 3 years, and it was phenomenal for a local authority to get compliance as high as between 98% and 100% and it would continue the journey.

Richard Buckley (Assistant Director, Residents and Buildings Safety) briefed members on the report:

- The Council was the landlord to circa 17,000 homes of which around 12,000 were tenanted. It was also tasked to ensure the safety of about 1,600 temporary accommodations and 49 high-rise buildings (HRBs).
- A lot had been done under a wider strategy encompassing compliance to the Grenfell Inquiry reports, Building Safety Act, Fire Safety Act, Fire Safety Regulations and Social Housing Regulation Act. The aim was to ensure residents felt confident and safe within their own homes.
- Building safety services were subject to annual accreditation and audits by third parties and internal monthly scrutiny by Cabinet Member and SLT assurance.
- H&F's responses went above the recommendations in the Grenfell Inquiry reports and changes in legislation pursuant to the incident including physical work (upgrading fire doors, installation of sprinklers and evacuation systems, improvements in fire detection like upgrading fuse boxes and lighting) and soft engagement work with fire brigade and residents (training provided to H&F staff and contractors, testing home appliances, creation of personal emergency evacuation plan (PEEP), advice letters and leaflets about the risk of e-bikes, posters on lifts banning the entry of e-bikes and e-scooters).

James Berry (Station Commander, Hammersmith Fire Station) outlined the background of developing "Make Every Contact Count" package with colleagues in Adult Social Care and Safeguarding teams to prevent fire deaths. Through this package, stakeholders might set foot on homes that were not visited and checked for 6 months, mitigate any fire risks detected and improve safeguarding for the residents therein. An online training package, lasted for about an hour, was available to frontline officers and H&F's contractors/subcontractors who could assume accountability and meet the required standards. The package was developed some two years ago and might require improvements to the core skills.

James Berry further said that the Fire Brigade was also involved in the provisions of the evacuation systems, wet risers and Lithium-ion battery project. On the latter, he noted the Lithium-ion market was moving ahead of the technology to ensure their safety. To reduce the fire risk up the HRBs, the Fire Brigade was considering requiring all batteries in a tower block be charged on the ground floor via commercially viable charging facilities. Meanwhile, educational events on safe use of the battery were held in Shepherd's Bush Green and Hammersmith Apollo targeting at gig economy

riders. James expressed appreciation on the great working relationship with the Residents and Building Safety team, in particular their fantastic support when the last three fatal fires broke out in H&F. In reply to Councillor Adronie Alford, he advised that information on the main fires for the whole of London was available on the Fire Brigade website.

In response, Richard Shwe confirmed that the online training for “Make Every Contact Count” package had formed part of the contract with the subcontractors. Also for the last 18 months, there had a “Housing Gold” rota, which was linked to the Council’s gold, silver and bronze emergency plans, for senior officers to deal with emergencies alongside their day jobs to make sure residents were safe. Richard emphasised that building compliance and safety was always on the agenda in all levels of the services.

Florrie Mahon (Chair, Fire, Building Safety and Repairs Working Group) said residents were involved in working groups like the one she was chairing. The Working Group, meeting six times a year, comprised nine members (eight tenants and one leaseholder) who had experienced previous problems with fires due to the Lithium-ion batteries and hence were quite involved with fire doors. The Working Group produced leaflets on, among other things, sprinkler systems, fire doors and PEEP, explaining how they could help stop/prevent a fire or get out of it safely. Florrie appreciated Council officers’ responses to members’ requests and residents felt needs were included.

On the Chair’s question about H&F residents being heard or otherwise, Florrie Mahon was confident that almost all of them were. Apart from her Working Group, there was the Housing Representative Forum and 26 TRAs which represented almost each block of flats in H&F. Once a piece of new information was out, it would be passed on to the estates represented.

Given construction and refurbishment materials were a big part of the Grenfell aftermath, the Chair was concerned about the safeguards in place in H&F to make sure the materials in H&F were safe and fire-proof. Richard Shwe said colleagues undertaking capital programme had done a lot of work to take out the flammable items out of the HRBs which was one of the compliance requirements under the Building Safety Act.

Councillor Sally Taylor was concerned that one of the estates had received the Council’s letter advising them not to put the e-bikes indoor. She sought information on the locations that e-bikes were allowed. Richard Shwe noted that the local authority was looking for suitable locations across the borough to put up new bike sheds. He undertook to brief the housing officer to explain the Council’s plan to the residents.

On Councillor Alford’s question whether e-bikes were allowed in tenants’ and leaseholders’ properties, Richard Shwe said as the Director of Housing, he would ban e-bikes from entering the properties. However, since the leases as well as tenants’ licences were there some 15 to 20 years ago when e-bikes did not exist, the Housing Service had worked around this technically by banning e-bikes from entering the lift/lift lobby which was the Council’s property. Meanwhile, legal colleagues were looking to change the lease and tenant’s licence to include the ban according to relevant legislative

amendments, if any. The Residents and Building Safety team was also liaising with Planning to look at housing design format to see what could be done.

Responding to Councillor Alford's further questions, Richard Shwe noted enforcement was recently taken against a case violating the ban reported by the TRA. With the support of the Met Police and colleagues in Adult Social Care, the local authority would present its case at the court hearing to be scheduled.

The Chair asked the Fire Service's view on the policy regarding Lithium-ion batteries to be adopted by the Council. James Benny advised that new lease/tenant licence should ban Lithium-ion batteries from entering the premises.

As there might be something else causing safety concerns next to plastic-backed white goods and Lithium-ion batteries, the Chair expressed concern about civic contract in place to protect residents. Richard Shwe said that the matter, if any, would be taken seriously. He recalled after the two fatal fires in last summer, the Housing Service was able to work with legal to put this information together within three months to discourage families buying e-bikes. In this connection, Florrie Mahon suggested a clause could be provided in the new leases that they were subject to changes pursuant to major incidents.

Richard Buckley added that with the advancement of battery technology, it would come with a battery management system which shall help prevent the incidents. Meanwhile, fire engineers were working collectively to give residents pragmatic advice on how to charge the batteries safely.

Councillor Alford raised safety concerns about smart meters and recalled a personal incident where the smart meter went into flames due to incorrectly wired in and shorted. Richard Buckley thanked her reflection and outlined the actions taken behind the electrical installation condition report. He agreed to look into the matter to see if they needed to be recalled like other electrical products. James Benny said if it was a trend, the Fire Brigade would raise it to fire investigation. He suspected it might be isolated incidents caused by low-cost components used by individual manufacturers.

In response to Councillor Alford's concern, Richard Buckley said that electrical safety was not 100%. As part of H&F service improvement and in line with the industry best practice and complying the Social Housing Act 2023, the standard was moved from 10-year to 5-year certification. He said that during certification, opportunities had been taken to upgrade the fuse box and increase the numbers of fire detector, as part of the ongoing cycle of continuous improvement. So far, the local authority had achieved 97.5% electrical safety as outstanding properties requiring certification was now less than 220.

Councillor Asif Siddique sought information on the details about the education done after the Grenfell Fire to raise the awareness of the residents in HRBs, including courses, and materials distributed by emails or physically.

James Berry noted that after the incident, there was a huge education push around the H&F area and leaflets were distributed to people living in HRBs. As there were people moving in and out of the Grenfell Tower blocks, visits had been carrying out by the Fire Services to check the dry and wet riser system, and the red box containing premises information. The crew would also knock on random doors and check residents' understanding of the fire strategy, the full evacuation procedures and the PEEP, sprinkler and suppression systems. Following the budget cuts, media screens were installed in H&F HRBs to roll out the Council's website information related to Lithium-ion battery fire and any updates.

Richard Shwe noted a joint emergency planning and awareness training was held every quarter for about 50 housing officers. The last two quarters were about HRBs and how to work together as a team when there was a fire, involving the police, public health and ambulance.

Councillor Frances Umeh (Cabinet Member for Housing and Homelessness) said after the Grenfell tragedy, the Council had put in place a fire safety programme which went above and beyond the minimum standards. The £20 million programme included fire safety checks on all Council properties in particular HRBs, free replacement of appliances and fire doors, distribution of fire safety booklet, housing newsletter and updated information on the website. A resident group was set up so that their voice on any concerns and issues on fire safety could be heard via the key contact officer. Councillor Siddique suggested holding regular surgeries with housing/residents' associations for them to receive continuous learning.

Summing up, the Chair suggested taking forward the following recommendations:

- To hold regular surgeries with residents.
- To build a new clause in future leases to keep up-to-date with new issues of risk and mitigation measures to be taken.

RESOLVED

That the Committee noted the report.

5. HIDDEN HOMELESSNESS

Clare Dorning (Head of Homelessness Prevention and Assessment) presented the report, including an overview of hidden homelessness and data which gave an insight into the level of homelessness in Hammersmith and Fulham (H&F), the mainstream homelessness approaches and the housing options available for single people.

Michael Angus (Director, Barons Court Project) shared five case studies of people they currently working with who were experiencing lived hidden homelessness. He noted that all of them were not of UK origin who usually had high expectations in terms of accommodation and housing yet more resourceful than rough sleepers. Some of them had mental health issues resulting in the lack of trust. He also observed that none of them was young

people as they might be sofa surfing in college and had meals during the day. About 25 Baron Court Project's guests who were classified as hidden homelessness and this had put extra pressure on the Project as the number of rough sleepers continued to rise, from about 400 guests with 8,500 attendances in 2017/18 to 900 guests with 14,000 attendance in 2023/24. Michael highlighted that people experiencing homelessness tended to feel invisible and hide themselves for safety.

Richard Shwe (Director of Housing) said he would like to have a discussion to to see if the Homelessness team could extend help to the vulnerable communities of refugees, including the 5 cases.

As regards the Chair's question about the quality of accommodation for single people with low income, Richard noted a lot had to be done together to help non-English speaking communities from asylum seeking background from understanding their issues and meeting their needs. He highlighted that a one-off grant of £65,000 was available this year to help single people at risk of homelessness and rough sleeping with direct financial support to go into private rented accommodation. They would work together to tackle rogue landlords to ensure accommodation quality from a regulatory point of view. Hopefully, this could help rebuild homeless people's trust that the Council would do things with the residents and make a difference.

On the need to interrupt the journey of hidden homelessness and escalate it into an area under the Council's statutory duty, Richard Shwe said the Housing Services teams were working together with co-production and public health to help these vulnerable adults, for example, providing wraparound care when they sought help from 145 King Street.

Clare Dorning highlighted the difficulty in maintaining non-statutory services like the wraparound care when the budgets were tight. Sometimes, the services had to become a floating support service or had to end. She undertook to discuss with Dr. Nicola Lang and partners to see if wraparound care could be continued.

ACTION: Clare Dorning

Dr Nicola Lang (Director of Public Health) thanked Michael Angus for presenting the moving case studies believing that they had no recourse to public fund (NRPF). She suggested:

- linking cases one and five to the thriving Iranian Association in the borough and case four to the Egyptian House.
- matching the religious needs of the NRPF clients via the Faith Forum.
- referring those in need to the rough sleeper mental health team called RAMP.
- strengthening ties with voluntary and community sector and H&F Law Centre to give support to NRPF cases.
- helping the cases to find jobs.

ACTION: Dr Nicola Lang

Dr Lang added that more funding was put into the Homelessness Prevention team creating 1.5 posts to match the one-off grant.

On safe space in small hours available to hidden homelessness, Dr Lang noted the Accident and Emergency departments in hospitals were always a free warm place where tea and sandwich were provided. A&E colleagues had also worked with Transport for London to keep stations open for people to stay warm.

Councillor Adronie Alford was concerned about signposting the way forward for college students leaving sofa surfing, for example, receiving advice in respect of college education or family services. Councillor Frances Umeh (Cabinet Member for Housing and Homelessness) thanked her helpful comments. She noted it was necessary to avoid stigma or issues being flagged for these non-UK college students. Dr Lang said she would speak with Peter Haylock who was the Director of Education and representative from West London College.

ACTION: Dr Nicola Lang

Councillor Asif Siddique asked about the reporting mechanism for hidden homelessness such that the Council, having had more precise figures, might refer the cases to accommodations in other boroughs within or outside London.

Clare Dorning highlighted the advantage of mobility of private rented accommodation. While the Homelessness team could not make referrals for hidden homelessness cases, it would offer advice and information about these accommodations in any part of the country particularly outside London as they were more affordable. Richard Shwe remarked that the Council would continue to share the good practice in dealing hidden homelessness with the central government with a view to getting more fundings on this matter.

On the mechanism of reporting and collating precise figures of hidden homelessness, Councillor Frances Umeh said it really relied on individuals' willingness to speak about their situation without worrying stigmatisation. As such, working collaboration on various aspects of hidden homelessness could proceed only after useful data could be gathered and measured. At the moment, the policy was to improve standards of private rented accommodation like those under the Renters Reform Act.

Noting that young people might find higher-quality low-cost accommodation in London, the Chair asked if the Council could explore this under social housing remit by converting unused office space as temporary accommodation after changing their legal purpose.

Richard Shwe said while keeping residents safe in the Council's current stock via compliance was its first and foremost duty being a regulatory service provider, the Housing Service would explore the option which would be a long-term fix having regard the need to address compliance and planning issues.

As regards policy change that should be made to improve the situation of hidden homelessness, Michael Angus noted that the homeless clients were often very desperate and the system did not work citing a young homeless man who could not afford the rent even if he had got a job after obtaining a degree. Moreover, the threshold for obtaining mental health and social care support kept on rising continuously. Michael said he did not have an answer of policy change but H&F was one of the best councils that he had worked with which would listen and take on board suggestions from the partners.

The Chair thanked the contributions of everyone attending. She suggested brining back a future report on the use of the one-off grant and the outcomes of the few recommendations or areas after exploration. Clare Dorning noted that the use of the grant was ringfenced to prevent people at risk of homelessness by providing financial assistance within this financial year.

ACTION: Richard Shwe

RESOLVED

That the Committee noted the report.

6. DATE OF FUTURE MEETINGS

Members noted the dates of future meetings:

- 22 July 2025
- 5 Nov 2025
- 3 February 2026
- 20 April 2026

The Chair suggested discussing the following at future meetings:

- Sheltered Housing
- Repairs Update
- Capital Programming and Regeneration
- Tenants' satisfaction surveys

Meeting started: 7.03 pm

Meeting ended: 8.52 pm

Chair:

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